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NOTES ON THE COSUMNES TRIBES OF CALIFORNIA.

BY JAMES MOONEY.

The following notes respecting the Cosumnes of California were obtained from Col. Z. A. Rice, of Atlanta, Georgia, who went to California in 1850 and spent several years in the immediate vicinity of the tribe, which formerly lived in the Sacramento basin, but is now practically extinct, having melted away like snow before the pitiless onset of the gold-hunter.

The Indians went almost naked, dressing being reserved for festive and ceremonial occasions. They were very fond of nose and ear rings, shell and stone beads, and paint. Their houses were of bark, sometimes thatched with grass and covered with earth. The bark was loosened from the trees by repeated blows with stone hatchets, the latter having the head fastened to the handle by means of deer sinews. Their ordinary weapons were bows and stone (chert) tipped arrows. The women made finely woven, conical baskets of grass, the smaller ones being used to hold water, while a larger kind was slung upon the back by means of a band pressing over the forehead, and was used in gathering seeds and grasshoppers. Like most Indians they were very fond of dogs, and there was always a large pack of yelping mongrel curs at every rancheria or hanging on the outskirts at dance gatherings and other public meetings.

Their food included almost everything—from pine nuts to clover tops and from grizzly bears to grasshoppers. They were fond of the nutritious seeds of the nut pine, which on this account was known as the “digger pine” by the miners. As the trunks of these trees are frequently without branches to a height of thirty or forty feet from the ground, the Indians ascended them by means of spliced poles long enough to reach to the first limbs. The pole was held in place by Indians on the ground, while an expert climber ascended and beat off the pine cones with a short pole. In the clover season, when the meadows were bright with pink and white blossoms, whole rancherias went out literally to graze, and the Indians might be seen lying prone in the herbage, masticating the clover tops like so many cattle. Wild oats also were abundant, and likewise were eaten raw.

Another herb, known to the miners as "wild collard," was boiled and eaten as greens. The mode of boiling was peculiar and closely resembles the method best known from its practice by the Assiniboin. A hole was dug in the the earth and plastered on the inside with wet clay, so as to form a rude kind of pot. Into this the herbs were put and covered with water, which was carried to the spot in grass-woven baskets. Next a fire was built and stones heated, which were then dipped quickly into a basket of water to remove the ashes, and put into the pot. In a few moments the water boiled and the mess was cooked.

The grasshopper hunt was a great event in Digger society, and was conducted in a very systematic manner. A whole settlement would turn out and begin operations by starting a number of small fires at regular intervals in a circle through the woods, guiding the flame by raking up the pine needles, and stamping out the fire when it spread too far. When the fires burned out there was left a narrow strip of bare ground enclosing a circular area of several acres, within which the game was confined. A large fire was then kindled at a point inside of the circle, taking advantage of the direction of the wind, and allowed to spread unchecked. The men, armed with bows and arrows and accompanied by their dogs, kept to the windward in front of the fire and shot down the rabbits and other small animals as the heat drove them from cover, while the women, with their conical baskets on their backs, followed up the fire to gather up the grasshoppers, which merely had their wings singed by the fire, but were not killed. As a squaw picked up a hopper she crushed its head between her thumb and finger to kill it, and then tossed it over her shoulder into the basket.

When the hunt was over, a hole about two feet deep was dug in the earth and filled with bark, which was then set on fire. When the heat was most intense the coals were raked out and the grasshoppers thrown in and thus roasted. Colonel Rice has even seen the Indians eat the grasshoppers alive, merely taking the precaution to pull off the rough legs, which might have a tendency to tickle the throat. Quails, fish, and squirrels were also roasted whole, although the fastidious savage always dipped them in water to remove the ashes and cool the meats before beginning his meal.

Their amusements were dancing, foot-ball, and card games, the latter adopted from the whites. In 1851 the natives on Dry creek, near Fiddletown, held a great dance. In its general features the

performance, which seemed to be some kind of a war dance, resembled Indian dances all over the continent. It was held in the open air, when the ground was parched and dry from long drouth—the dancers, men and women, moving around in a circle singing monotonous chants, occasionally varied by a chorus of yells. The men carried bows and arrows in their hands, while the women wore rattles of terrapin shells upon their legs. These shells were filled with pebbles and fastened upon a strip of fur which was belted on at the knee and ankle precisely like those which the writer has seen worn by the Cherokees, excepting that on the Cosumnes and Moquelumne rivers the shells were arranged in a single row instead of in a square pattern. In the slower movements of the dance the terrapin rattles make no sound, but when the women stamp the noise sounds like that of buckshot falling into a tin pan. The orchestral accompaniment was of the most primitive sort. Some of the performers simply carried a couple of sticks which they struck together, keeping time with the chorus. The drum was a half section of a hollow log, placed on the ground with the convex side up, while several stout fellows in moccasined feet stood upon it and stamped in unison with the general din. As the ground was dry and the dancers circled round and round in the same path, singing, yelling, and stamping, clouds of dust rose and settled upon their faces and bodies, while the streams of perspiration, trickling down in furrows through the paint and dirt, made them look like so many devils.

The dance, of course, was a religious ceremonial, and during its progress my informant noticed two Indians, a man and his wife, sitting a short distance apart from the dancers, rocking their bodies from side to side and uttering low piteous moans, while the tears streamed down their faces and their whole manner betokened the most abject grief. On questioning an interpreter it was found that their only child was lying at home dangerously ill; that they had exhausted every remedy and performed every rite known to the shamans without avail, and now, as a last resort, they had come here to weep and pray until the sun went down that their loved one might not be taken away from them. It was the one touch that brought red and white alike to the level of a common humanity.

Their foot-ball game was more properly a foot-race.* Two parallel tracks were laid off and each party had its own ball. Two

* See account of Zuni Foot-Race p. 225.

athletic young fellows, representing the two contending parties, took their stand at one end, each with a ball on the ground in front of him, and at the signal each kicks it along his respective track towards the goal. All along the line were stationed relays of players, whose duty it was to assist in getting the ball through. It was a rough-and-tumble game to see who should kick the ball, for no one was allowed to touch it with his hand. Two posts were put up at each end of the track and the ball must be driven between these posts. Betting was heavy, the stakes being Indian trinkets of all kinds, and judges and stake-holders presided with a great deal of dignity. The score was kept by means of an even number of short sticks, and as each player drove the ball home he drew out one of the sticks, and so on until the game was won. It was a very exciting play and aroused as much interest as does a horse race among the whites.

Their principal deity seemed to be the sun, and the women had a ceremony somewhat resembling the sun dance of the upper Missouri tribes. The petitioner took her position at daybreak, sitting upon the ground, with eyes intently fixed upon the sun, and tears streaming down her cheeks. She continued to send up prayers and lamentations all day, turning her body with the sun until it sank below the western hills in the evening.

The dead were buried in the earth, although farther south, beyond the Moquelumne river, among tribes of different linguistic stock, instances of scaffold burial were observed. The women, as was natural, were the most demonstrative in their grief. On the death of a relative they cut off their hair and smeared their faces with pine pitch and soot. For months after the funeral they paid periodic visits to the grave, lamenting as if over a new bereavement, while they placed offerings of beads upon the grave and poured libations of water upon the green turf.

THE GREENLANDERS.—*Ausland* for January 27, 1890, publishes some observations on the Greenlanders from the journal of a Danish missionary. They contain but little technographical information, but are chiefly interesting for the view they give of the relations between the missionary and his converts in regard to the old heathen customs, such as witchcraft, blood-feud, etc. (*Die Grönländer. Nach dem tagebuch eines missionars aus dem Dänischen.* *Ausland*, Vol. 63, p. 66-71.)

JOHN MURDOCH.